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## BEYOND THE BRACERO SYSTEM Part I

by Henry Anderson

Last May 29, our spokesmen in the United States House of Representatives made one of the most important decisions they have been called upon to make for a long while. The question before the House was: shall the bracero program, under Public Law 78, be extended again as it has been in the past? A "yes" vote meant the bracero system would be continued in its present form until the end of 1965, with every possibility of further extension beyond that date. A "no" vote meant that the system would come to an end on December 31 of this year. The vote was 158 yeas against 174 nays. After half a dozen Congressional blessings since its initial passage in 1951, Public Law 78 is finally to be permitted to die.

I should like to explain why I consider this one of the more significant decisions Congress has made in our time. Then I should like to discuss what seems likely to happen now, as an aftermath of this decision. These events, past and future, ought to be of real concern to every American consumer -- which is to say, every one of us.

What is this word, "bracero?" It is from the Spanish, and means, literally, "arm-man." It might be freely translated as "man who works with his arms and hands" -- roughly equivalent to our phrase "farm hand." And what is the bracero system? On the surface, it is simply an arrangement between the governments of the United States and Mexico, whereby farm workers are brought to this country under contract to fill farm labor "shortages." I hope there are quote marks in my voice as I use that word, "shortages," for this, the most basic concept of the bracero system, is its most fallacious. Suppose that wages in the steel industry averaged eighty-one cents an hour, and there was no overtime, no sick leave, no unemployment insurance, no health or welfare or pension plans, no child labor laws, no minimum wage, no worker representation, and the average worker was able to find employment only a little over a third of the time. If, under these conditions, American citizens preferred to work in other industries, would you say there was a "labor shortage" in the steel industry? Or would you say the "labor shortage" was utterly spurious and artificial, and that the only real shortage was in wages and working conditions? This is the situation in the type of agriculture which claims it needs the bracero system.

Public Law 78 goes on to say that no braceros are supposed to be imported if their presence in this country will have an adverse effect on American workers similarly employed. This is an insult to a rational person's rationality. Since braceros are imported at the very same wages and conditions which Americans have refused as substandard, braceros have always, automatically, by definition, had an adverse effect on the farm labor market. Without their presence, farm wages would have had to rise to attract an American labor force. Growers would have had to make whatever adjustments within their industry were necessary to pay such wages. But within the wonderland of the bracero system, no adjustments were required. Farm wages could be, and often were, frozen at levels intolerable to American citizens, but acceptable to impoverished peasants from underdeveloped Mexico. And this by businessmen who call themselves defenders of a free economy!

Economically, the results have been disastrous. In many parts of the Southwest, American farm workers have been forced to a simple and brutal choice: either accept the standards of Mexican peons, or get out of farm labor altogether. The adverse effect built into the bracero system is most direct and obvious in the case of hired workers, but it is by no means confined to them. Small farmers and their family helpers have had the value of their labor devalued in very much the same manner, and to the same extent, as hired farm workers -- even though they may not realize it. Family farmers have left the land by the tens of thousands, and their farms are absorbed by farming corporations. No more than 2% of the country's growers have ever used braceros; they have tended to be heavily concentrated in California and the Southwest -- and they have tended to be industrialized growers. The largest bracero-user in California last year, for example, was the California Packing Corporation, which used 1,456 braceros. Is CPC a "farmer?" It is a \$200,000,000 corporation whose profits are so good it has split its stock twice in recent years.

As a matter of fact, the bracero system has even had an adverse effect on bracero-users themselves, if they only recognized it. Lured on by an unlimited



supply of cheap labor, artificially created by an act of Congress, growers have thought they could make a quick killing by greatly expanding their plantings of tomatoes and other crops -- without regard for the demand of the marketplace. Returns to growers for many crops have dropped during the bracero era, but instead of analyzing their problems properly, they have attempted to recoup by ever and ever more and cheaper labor -- the very root of their troubles.

But, devastating as its economic damage has been, the greatest and most basic evil of the bracero system is political, sociological, psychological -- and moral, if I may use that word in an age which seems not to believe in morality any more. The bracero system is a captive labor system. That is the long and the short of it. We call ourselves the leaders of the free world, and yet we have tolerated a system of imported peonage within our borders for these many years.

What do you think of when you think of the concept, freedom? Freedom of association, perhaps? If braceros attempt to band themselves together, they are shipped back to Mexico. Freedom to move, perhaps? If braceros leave the place to which they are assigned by their masters, they are apprehended as surely as runaway slaves, and shipped back to Mexico. Freedom to petition for redress of grievances? If braceros complain, they are blacklisted as troublemakers and shipped back to Mexico. Freedom to have a family? Braceros are denied the right to family life so long as they remain in our country. Freedom to communicate and to receive communications? When Americans have tried to talk with braceros, they have been arrested, found guilty, and the judgment has been upheld in an appellate court of the State of California.

Do you believe, as I believe, that freedom ought to mean choice between viable alternatives? Braceros have no choices. They must work for whomever they are told, doing whatever they are told, wherever they are told, for as long as they are told, under whatever conditions they are told. Their choice is only between selling themselves into indentured servitude in the United States, or staying in Mexico and slowly starving to death. This is not a choice between viable alternatives. The choice between slavery and starvation is freedom's opposite; it is a classical wellspring of despotism.

But the Governor of California, a liberal Democrat, sees nothing wrong with the bracero system. He urged the extension of the program this year. The President of the United States, a liberal Democrat, sees nothing wrong with the bracero system. He also urged its extension this year. This is the same gentleman who uses the word, freedom, so generously when he is talking about Cuba or Berlin. The record of conservatives is, if anything, worse. Last month, the California Republican Assembly voted for revival of the bracero program. The Honorable Mr. Goldwater is an ardent supporter of the bracero system. This is the same gentleman who will solicit your vote next year on the grounds that he believes in freedom. Words are losing all meaning...

To the best of my knowledge, there is only one labor system in the world to match the bracero program for unvarnished tyranny, and that is the way mine operators and planters in the Union of South Africa obtain contract workers from native kraals, where the Bantus are kept penned until they are so wretched and desperate they are willing to accept whatever is offered. South Africa, interestingly enough, is also a charter member of the "free world."

Time does not permit me to develop fully this point: that the bracero system, in its essence, is a rape of freedom. Time does not permit me to develop the parallels between the bracero system and the chattel labor system which we may have thought was abolished by the Emancipation Proclamation exactly one hundred years ago. If anyone cares to pursue this subject, he may be interested in my booklet, Fields of Bondage. For further information, I may be reached in care of this station.

It may seem, in view of the Congressional action of May 29, that the bracero issue is mercifully behind us and that I am merely dragging over the dead embers of history. I suggest this is not the case. If there is one thought I want to leave with you, it is this: the bracero system is not an isolated phenomenon. It is a manifestation of an enduring cast of mind which I propose to call the plantation mentality. Among other things, this cast of mind insists on large-scale agriculture rather than an agriculture of freeholders. It insists there is something demeaning and degrading about working on the land -- that the people who own the land should not be expected to work on the land. And it insists that large-scale agriculture must have unrestricted access to one or another form of captive labor.

This is the attitude on which the plantation economy of the ante-bellum South rested -- the attitude which was somehow able to rationalize human slavery



in the midst of a society which called itself God-fearing and democratic. It is the same attitude on which the plantation economy of California and the Southwest has always rested. The large-scale, industrialized California agriculture which we may take for granted is not by any means rooted in the natural order of things. It assumed its present form because of the prior existence of a large pool of Chinese coolie labor which was discharged into the Central Valley in 1869, upon completion of the Southern Pacific Railroad. In later decades, the Chinese coolies were replaced by contract workers imported from Japan, who were in turn replaced by one after another group of workers who invariably had a distinguishing characteristic in common: they were so disadvantaged, so inarticulate, so desperately poor, they were willing to work under conditions tantamount to captivity. The list includes Hindus, Arabs, Filipinos, Dust Bowl refugees, prisoners-of-war, convicts, wetbacks, and braceros. Labor standards in California agriculture -- or the absence of standards -- have always been set by the latest in the apparently endless chain of captive workers.

California growers have come to assume that they have an inherent right to a captive labor force. The corruption of the plantation mentality has gone so far that California growers assume it is the government's responsibility -- that is, taxpayers, you and me -- to provide them with their captive workers.

The plantation mentality dies hard, when it dies at all. The Emancipation Proclamation did not abolish the captive labor tradition of the Old South. A system of sharecropping and tenant farming was developed which was not very different in kind from chattel slavery. The stories we read in our newspapers daily, from Georgia, and Alabama, and Mississippi, are terrible evidence that the plantation mentality never really died, and the captive workers have not yet really been freed.

Just so, I suggest that the battle over the bracero system is not really over. The larger battle, of which this is only a part, may never be over. There is an irrepressible conflict between two radically different visions of agriculture: one of free men, and the other of workers in some form of bondage. This conflict will haunt our consciences because agriculture is and will continue to be the most necessary of all human endeavors. And the conflict will haunt us because it is worldwide. It has been the basis for most Latin American revolutions, and will be the basis for those which are almost certain to come. It is the basis for most of the bitterness in Africa. Amid all the talk of industrialization, we should not forget that most of the world is still primarily agrarian, and the cry for agrarian justice and land reform moves more human beings than the cry for industrial justice. But even while bondage is particularly conspicuous in agriculture, here and abroad, you may, if you like, view this form of liberation as part of the overarching quest which will continue so long as it is possible for any men, anywhere, in any manner, to hold any other men in thrall.

I urge you, then, to bear these things in mind: the plantation mentality; the captive labor tradition which is as old as California agriculture itself; the entire, complex, entrenched institution which has been erected on this foundation, and which, in the manner of social institutions generally, has sent tentacles deeply into our other social institutions -- economic, educational, political, judicial, and all the rest.

What will happen now that the bracero system seems destined to expire on December 31? Given the background I have sketched, several things are all too likely to occur. In the first place, bracero-users are going to press for restoration of their system in this session of Congress. They are already doing so. They are attempting to exploit the usual liberal weakness for compromise by saying, "If you won't let us have a two year extension of our system, the only reasonable thing is to let us have a one year extension." They may get it. They have powerful and wealthy friends and allies. And opponents of the system may be exhausted after their long battle for abolition. Their guards are down. The vote of May 29 may well be overturned before the present session adjourns. All kinds of curious things become possible in the frantic final few days of a Congressional session.

What if the bracero-users do not get their system restored this year? It is scheduled to expire, you recall, on December 31. At that time the great majority of bracero-users will be in the middle of the winter slack season without any labor needs at all. But there are two significant exceptions. The Imperial Valley lettuce harvest will be in full swing. And so will the Southern California harvest of lemons and navel oranges. Both these crops are heavily dominated by bracero labor, even though both industries are in monopolistic positions and could well arrange to pay whatever would be required to attract American workers. Will they do so? I doubt it very much.



Consider the situation. Potential profits in the winter lettuce and citrus crops are perhaps on the order of fifteen million dollars. Bracero-users are playing for much larger stakes than that. The total farm wage bill in California is now about half a billion dollars a year. If farm wages rose to the level of other industrial wages, they would total at least a billion and a half dollars a year. The difference -- one billion dollars a year -- is the stake industrial agriculture is really playing for. By comparison, a fifteen million dollar loss, for one season, does not seem so very great.

Perhaps you anticipate what I am suggesting. It is altogether within the realm of possibility that citrus and lettuce growers will deliberately let their crops go unharvested this coming winter to show Congress that "Americans won't do farm labor." Growers can accomplish this in the easiest possible manner: by simply doing nothing. By sitting back, offering the same old wages and working conditions and indignity which Americans have long rejected as intolerable. Losses sustained by individual growers will be underwritten by the industry as a whole, in much the same manner the Council of California Growers and other labor-busting organizations have been underwritten in the recent past. And the corporation executives and Madison Avenue types who really make the decisions in the name of California's 90,000 growers will pull out all the stops in their public relations machinery. Somehow, the phrase "crops rotting in the fields" has a visceral appeal which otherwise reasonable men seem unable to resist. I warn you in advance to expect to hear this phrase many times in the months ahead, even though I can tell you in the interests of strict accuracy that lettuce, when left to its own devices, does not rot. It just goes to seed.

Will Congress be able to hold out against this kind of hysteria? You are able to judge the courage of Congress as well as I. But let us assume, for the sake of discussion, that Congress does hold out. Will industrial agriculture go about its proper business of recruiting and training a labor force of American workers, under American conditions? The odds are still against it.

The plantation mentality, as we have said, changes slowly. Bracero-users will have another recourse. If Public Law 78 is not revived amid the manufactured crises of next winter and spring, there will still be a way agricultural employers can get foreign workers into the country: under Public Law 414, the Immigration and Nationality Act of 1950, more commonly known as the McCarran-Walter Act. Among other things, this law says that workers shall not be admitted from abroad if the U.S. Secretary of Labor determines that their presence will adversely affect the wages and working conditions of Americans similarly employed. But for all practical purposes, this portion of the law has been nullified by a wholly arbitrary policy of the Departments of Labor, Justice, and State. The Departments have decided not to make any investigations into adverse effect if a given employer imports fewer than 25 workers at any one time.

You haven't heard, and you won't hear, about workers being imported through this administrative loophole by, say, automobile manufacturers. That industry is organized, and the United Auto Workers, needless to say, wouldn't stand for any such connivance. You haven't heard, and you won't hear, about workers being pulled through the loophole from Africa or Asia, because the McCarran-Walter Act is a racist law, and Africans and Asians are almost wholly excluded. But Mexico is exempt from the quota system of the Act. And Southwestern agriculture has no organized labor movement worthy of the name. The only reason industrial growers have not made more use of the McCarran-Walter loophole to date is that it was even simpler for them to get braceros. Take away the braceros, and workers under the McCarran-Walter Act, as it is presently administered, will begin to hold a fatal fascination for the plantation mentality.

As a matter of fact, the shrewder California growers have already imported some thousands of workers under this new system, during the past two or three years. They call them "green cards," because of the color of the identifying document the workers are required to carry at all times. The card, you see, is more important than the flesh-and-blood human being who carries it. Remember this phrase: "green card." I believe the next great battle in the long war between the plantation mentality and free men will be waged over this issue.

"Green card" workers are captives almost as surely as braceros are, and in much the same ways. They come to the United States, leaving their families behind them, because they are driven by the knout of hunger. In order to get the necessary credentials, they must pay large bribes, which are as illegal as they are universal in this system, just as in the bracero system. To pay



these bribes, a penniless Mexican peon must go deeply into debt to a money-lender or labor contractor on the Mexican side of the border, who is in league with the employers on the U.S. side. These debts constitute a club over the head of the workers to ensure that they, like the braceros, will work, uncomplainingly, at whatever wages they are offered, and all the rest of it: the whole unsavory captive labor tradition all over again.

If bracero-users fail in the efforts to overturn the Congressional decision of last May 29, I venture to predict that next year there will be 70,000 "green card" workers in California's fields, replacing the 70,000 braceros who were here last year. That is, unless something is done about the conditions which gave rise to the bracero system in the first place; unless some countervailing force in our society emerges to challenge frontally the plantation mentality in the Southwest, as it is starting to be challenged in the Southeast.

What might these countervailing forces be? How might the underlying conditions be changed? How can we use this opportunity to move beyond the bracero system -- to convert our fields of bondage to the free and blooming fields they ought to be? I should like to discuss these questions with you in my next program.